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Critical Beginnings

Reflections and Refractions Through Seven Years of ICQI

Claudio Moreira, Tami Spry, Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract These three scholars met during the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI) in 2005 when they were put on a panel together for autoethnography. They understand QI as a space of compassionate scholarship. In their text, they allude to Norman Denzin's performance of compassion and his intellectual dream that, accurately, has generated not only the beginning but, more importantly, the continuation and development of such a space. The authors understand their work at QI as personally and politically transformational, allowing a continual critical engagement of how meaning is made in contexts with others. Using their own journeys at QI as the theorizing tool, they conceptualize QI as a radicalizing space of pedagogy and scholarship.

Keywords: *critical inquiry, performance, loss, bodies, International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*

Beginnings

Different bodies, in gender, nationality, united in performance.

Claudio, Tami, and Jonathan enter from a different part/corner of the world on their first line, then through writing they move into a different and yet shared place (wherever that may be) as they sing their cry:

Jonathan: Saturday morning.

Claudio: 7 May.

Tami: 9:45 a.m.

ALL: 2005.

J: 1st Congress,

C: day two.

T: Session 205,

ALL: "The Performativity of Loss"

J: Room 403

C: Union.

T: At this first Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, we are placed in panels not by ourselves, but by the conference planners.

J: Chair, Tami L. Spry, St. Cloud State University. "Paper and Skin: An Autoethnography in Performative Pieces."

T: Claudio Moreira. "Made for Sex." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

C: Jonathan Wyatt, University of Oxford. "The Telling of a Tale: A Reading of 'A Gentle Going?'"

Act I

Tami: I am wreckage. I am free floating, P-Funk, feet-don't-fail-me-now, Electric Boogaloo wreckage. More or less. Ambiguous in all my artificial mediated fracturesque construction, writing is the only ritual I can enact right now, words the only thing my body can feel. I am Shirley Temple, Sheila E., John Travolta, John the Baptist, and I wish I were Janice. I wish I could just sing and not care or care too much and feel the drugs and hear the sound of my voice tied to the whipping post as you scream and cheer the raspy edges of my soul coming out my mouth. I am moist and sexual. I am dead and rotting. I am whoop-ti-do wreckage . . . and I eat words like air.

Jonathan: The son remembered that he hadn't kissed his father goodbye. He went back and gently touched the father's forehead with his lips. From his early teens they never used to kiss, or hug, or shake hands (though he proudly remembered the hand on his shoulder as they walked down to the sea). In the last few years, when his father seemed to have become like a child, kissing had become permissible again.

As he leaned down, his father spoke: "When I'm back home, maybe next time you come, I need to go through some things with you. Things in the garage and in my room." He wondered for a moment what things they could be—his father was so organized—but slowly registered what he was intimating: There was little time.

The son replied, "That's fine, Dad. Let's do that." Leaving, he moved alone through the corridors, seeing no one but the receptionist, and walked into the sunshine. He

felt relief. I need to go through some things with you. Let's do that. Their last conversation.

Claudio: I am 10. I am lying in the floor after being beat by a 15-year-old boy named João.

I am there lying in dirt, in poverty, in violence

A pain that is so intense that I can't

Even cry no more

From the corner of my eye, I see João taking his penis out of his pants. He is going to urinate on my face.

Act 2

And then as if it would still be possible to be in that time and place . . . challenging static notions of time and space, bodies and history, futures and pasts:

Tami: What am I doing here dragging my dead-ass body to U of Illinois?

I can't stand conferencing anymore. I can't stand the power suits and business ties and pseudo civic engagement (en-gag-ment) of NCA, my discipline's national convention. Civic en-gag-ment on whose terms? For whose purpose? It sounds like another homogenizing power-grab word like "cultural diversity." I've been through too much, too little, to have and to hold, to be here.

But here.

There is a different vibe here.

This Norman Denzin, the head of this conference, is walking around in shorts, Birkenstocks, and a big ole shirt.

Claudio speaking, being, theorizing boyhood on the streets of Brazil. A white, nonwhite, not-quite-white Brazilian male. Right? He is strong, beautiful, articulate, furtive here in this space as if he thinks he may not belong, though his theory so clearly articulates from the root of his guts. Fleishy theory shit and ontological guts of performance. The textualizing body where flesh and page and stage collaborate into this . . . liveness.

Jonathan: Saturday morning. 7 May. 9:45 a.m. 1st Congress, day two. Session 205, "The Performativity of Loss." Room 403 Union. Chair, Tami L. Spry, St. Cloud State University. "Paper and Skin: An Autoethnography in Performative Pieces." Jonathan Wyatt, University of Oxford. "The Telling

of a Tale: A Reading of 'A Gentle Going?' " Claudio Moreira. "Made for Sex." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The small room is full, tightly packed; people sit on the floor at the front, some are in the doorway. Tami is at the front. I have seen Tami before, in Carolyn Ellis's workshop on Thursday. I recognized her name from the program and said hello, we're in a session together on Saturday. She said, "Oh, are we?" Claudio sits along with me. I think it must be him; we haven't met before.

First, it's Tami. She performs. She's a performer. Her tears fall in sheets of paper, her agony tearing the air in the timbre of her voice.

I stand. I declare awareness of anxiety: It had been present as I sat, I say, but, through Tami's work with us, I feel able to be here. I read about losing Dad. I shift from one side of the room to the other. I hold myself together.

Tami: Jonathan. Is that an English accent? Tall. Lean. Long. And barefoot. He's performing barefoot. Where did he come from that he would perform at a conference barefoot? Where have I been all of my life that I wouldn't expect barefooted research? His father. His father is dead. My insides are dead.

Jonathan: Claudio stands and perches on the edge of the table. He's huge. All hair and muscles. (Mum would use her favorite, familiar description, "He's about your height, dear, but twice as broad.") His story's refrain—persistent, nagging, relentless—will stay with me years later. "The boy was 5. Remember, he was only 5. The boy was only 5."

Claudio: Saturday morning. 7 May. 9:45 a.m. 1st Congress, day two. Session 205, "The Performativity of Loss." Room 403 Union. Chair, Tami L. Spry, St. Cloud State University. "Paper and Skin: An Autoethnography in Performative Pieces." Jonathan Wyatt, University of Oxford. "The Telling of a Tale: A Reading of 'A Gentle Going?' " Claudio Moreira. "Made for Sex." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The room is empty. I am there at the door. The section will not start for another 10 minutes or so. I remember Tami from Ellis and Bochner's workshop the day before. I have read Tami's work from before . . . Me? I am a grad student, and it will be my first presentation ever. I'm so scared! Many thoughts storm in my brain . . . I am going to perform about violence, rape, on a 5-year-old boy. Remember he is 5! Do I have the right? The right to freeze the body of a boy being raped? I don't belong here . . . I say under my breath to no one. I am good at cleaning bathrooms. I leave the door and run away for a smoke.

Tami: He has babies. He has babies here in this space. Oh. Babies. Here in a space, an academic place made sterile through mind-body splits, is now made . . . real with . . . babies in a stroller and their mother, his wife, here. I drug my baby-empty body here to perform with a man and his babies and their mother. Where am I? What kind of academia is this? What has this Norman Denzin done?

Claudio: The room is now full. I am back at the door. I am really scared. I see Tami. I approach her to introduce myself. Tami gently speaks to me. She embraces me. I feel protected. In the years to come, this moment will always stay with me. In the years to come, I often ask myself if this scholarship thing would turn out okay had I not met Tami at that moment. Tami Spry is here for me . . . protecting me with her blessing! Then I see Jonathan. I remember him from Ellis and Bochner's workshop the day before.

Tami takes the stage . . .

It is not only my first time presenting but my first time watching a performance such as this . . .

Tami takes the stage . . .

Her body, her work

Hints, seduces, deceives, infuriates, and engages our living bodies within the worlds that we inhabit.

Norman Denzin's words never make more sense to me

"Writing creates the worlds we inhabit" (2003, p. xii).

Holding tears

My eyes move from Tami to the back of the room . . . From Tami to Dani and my babies.

My babies are there . . .

Then Jonathan takes the stage . . . barefoot . . . like Norman! He has a cane in his hands.

Jonathan takes me where I don't want to go

Fatherhood, loss, memories,

Love and pain

His father is dead and mine . . .

Is alive!

And yet, I want to interrupt Jonathan and selfishly ask him if

I could borrow his story and pretend it is mine

Even if for a few minutes

Jonathan generously gave me that . . . not the similarities—no I cannot see
 myself in his stories—but what it may be
 For me and my babies . . . I am a son
 I am father!
 Then, it's my turn . . .
 Between Tami and Jonathan, at the house of Norman Denzin,

"I read 'A Gentle Going?' (Wyatt, 2005) at a conference in May 2005. It
 was the first time that I had read the story to anyone. I shared the
 platform with two colleagues, who performed stories of their own
 losses. When all three of us had finished, there was silence" (Wyatt,
 2006, p. 816).

I will not be peed at!

Act 3

*The three performers move again to signal the time shift to the present. Is the present
 ever possible in writing? Is the present ever possible in performance?*

Claudio: Between Jonathan

I sense your voice: not deep, but strong. Its tenor clarity. And your
 singing voice, that you playfully raised to be heard above others at the
 end of hymns, harmonizing the final phrase. (Wyatt, 2009, p. 502)

And Tami

But this isn't a conference, this is QI, this is a place where bodies do not
 rush or slip away to a hotel room for conference sex, this is a place of
 desire, a place in desire, a place where epistemologically enfleshed
 methodologies are consummated, and collide, publicly, politically,
 pedagogically, personally. (Spry, 2010, p. 234)

. . . in the house of Norman Denzin

I am in the mood, as suggested by Tami, for a raw writing

I am in the mood, as suggested by Jonathan in an e-mail, for quick and dirty
 writing

Raw, quick, and dirty

As the wounds in our bodies.

Tami: This is a love song to you, Norman Denzin. Shamelessly unreflexive, sans critique, just love. But maybe just love is a most risky critique. "To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace," writes bell hooks (2000), "we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice" (p. xxix). Love can end in connection and betrayal. The people present in the place and space you created pull me from the wreckage, allow me to speak a grammar of fear and connection with all of its messy pain and joy.

And Claudio in the House of Norman Denzin:

"I am not a poor kid in Brazil anymore.

Poor Brazilian kids don't read Denzin and don't go to classes and don't reflect upon their situation supported by the knowledge of history, theory, method and philosophy.

I consider what I am doing an onto-epistemological endeavor—as a being-in-knowing, and a being-in-doing.

It is about commitment.

It is about a commitment to a Bleeding Embodied Epistemology.

The body

Living . . . performing . . . disrupting . . . resisting" (Moreira, 2008, pp. 673–674)

It is in "bodying forth" with others in an embodied communion, in a "bleeding embodied epistemolog[ical]" "I". Different from an "ethnographic-I", this is a troubled, sensual, contingent *communitas*.

A disposition,

C: a relation of being and knowing that cuts back,

J: a possibility

T: a figure of relation emerging

C: from difference

J: from entanglement

T: from ravishment,

C: from . . .

T: and it is here that I must stop; for to speak of love in relation to research, in an academic context, on an academic panel, even one founded by the roaming free radical Norman Denzin feels heresy, but not in the truth of my "un/learning body" (Madison, 2006),

because surely, truly, and ravishingly,
it is love and desire

for *communitas*, for Burke's consubstantiality, for articulation and interruption of the personally political pains that I inflict on others and that are inflicted upon me within the uneven, unjustified, and inequitable systems privileging some and disempowering others.

Heresy or not, it is a disposition of love in autoethnographic research that has given me the courage to move into entanglements with others about race, gender, privilege. Claudio's history of class struggle, Jonathan's history of class privilege. And mine? My white skin and my professional status afford me the privilege to hide the fact that neither of my parents graduated from high school. And radicalized spaces like these allow me the privilege to theorize and problematize that fact with honor. To theorize that my mother as the oldest of 13 children knew what she had to do and did it with grace and strength. To theorize my father as a headstrong boy with a single mother who kissed him good-bye as he left a music scholarship at 16 to literally join the circus as a drummer.

Here, it is only through a disposition of love, through love as an epistemological blood-red possibility, that I see my class heritage tangled in race with Claudio's body, tangled in privilege with Jonathan's body. Us three, called together through a love song. As Jonathan writes of his father:

"I must write about you. I have to. It is a calling, perhaps. Your story calls me. In so doing, if you stay—become—alive to me and become alive to others, does that make this calling worthy?"

J: I will write myself to you, and fail.

C: I will try, keep on trying.

T: "Today, I think it worth the attempt" (Wyatt, 2010, pp. 502–503).

Jonathan: I lost myself that year. Here. At this conference in 2005.

It felt like the first time, 25 years ago. I had one night in New York on my own. I asked a puzzled fellow hotel guest in the lift if there were any places to eat. In New York. I was anxious, disturbed. I locked myself in my hotel room, with its three bolts, from late afternoon, and listened to imagined screams and police sirens through my fitful night's sleep. I was in the airport early the next morning, relieved and alive, 10 hours before my flight.

So, that morning in 2005, I was on a rare visit to an unfamiliar, intimidating land, older, but anxious still. On the flight from Chicago, I had

peered through the window of the unstable plane onto the unfamiliar geometric landscape.

Out of place, out of sorts, out of mind. Disturbed, lost, but happy to be so this time.

On our first morning, the Wednesday, the day before the workshops, Ken and I walked here to the Union from the Ramada hotel. We asked the hotel receptionist for directions. She looked at us askance, as if walking was an intrepid, ill-advised English idea.

We laughed at ourselves for not being familiar with the mores of this place. We posed for photographs at the front of a monster truck and munched trail mix, the two lost boys.

I was a raw U.S. traveler, a raw scholar, and raw in my grief.

Claudio: I am writing before the event about what will happen in this performance in 2011, thousands of miles away from Jonathan and Tami, before our encounter, of bones, meat, flesh, and blood, in the house of Norman Denzin and yet,
Typing the words with my moving fingers I am there,
Between Tami

Writing was the only ritual I could enact, words the only thing my body could feel. Having broken into little pieces, my subject position went from a destabilized “me” to a chaotic but oddly comforting “we.” Pieces of selves became others manifesting language and constructing a plural and kinesis sense of self that seemed to navigate the interrelations between self/other/bodies/language. (Spry, 2006, p. 340)

And Jonathan

This paper is

A stuttering

A stammering

A searching for words

Words that break,

That go beyond what is written,

That look for angles and lines of flight. (Wyatt, 2008, p. 955)

We were here together before . . . we were here six years ago . . . we have been here since . . . Between and among Jonathan and Tami, moving from in and out “destabilized me” to a “comforting we.”

I try to re-present accounts of growing up poor and being a professor now, and everything in between, through my experiences of class, race, and gender, with a focus on my trajectory at QI as performance of resistance. We create resisting stories, resisting oppressive narratives of loss, resisting patriarchal structures with love and anger, resisting disembodied knowledge construction that still tends to reproduce the very oppression it intends to challenge, and resisting narratives that defy the “existence” of broken families.

And bones, meat, blood simply *flesh* and Bodies

Living in a vacuum. Where *I* and *we* are different and in communion
Our pray(er)

Between Jonathan

Does loss, through its pain, speak of connection? Loss still has presence. Absence is bleak; writing, an attempt to traverse its barren landscape. Loss is conscious of what has been present, is resonant of the lost. With absence there is forgetting. (Wyatt, 2008, p. 957)

And Tami,

For me, autoethnography is performative/skeptical/multiple, it is also in the service of simultaneously deconstructing what it might be putting together, which is, for me, the continual process of critical reflexion. It is, definitely, a nervous condition, as Pollock decries, but, paradoxically, this writing practice is prayer and offers me peace. (Spry, 2009, p. 609)

In the house of Norman Denzin,

We cannot be peed at!

Tami: My god . . . six years ago . . . I was still bleeding. What is a blood-red epistemology now that I no longer bleed? No more fruit of thy womb.

Hail Mary, Mother of God

Blessed art thou among women

and blessed is the fruit of thy womb

Jesus.

Coming here six years ago was a Hail Mary pass

The fruit of my womb passing on and on and on.

I came here yearning to know what is possible after absence, to embody the afterlife of loss, after 9/11, after an un/American politics of ignorance

and bullying. In my body politic were dark and empty and furtive places where things did not come to fruition, places from which there were no fruits of the labor. And whether we believe that everything or nothing happens for a reason, the fact is that I was placed here with these two men. Here in a stuttering, a stammering, with words that go beyond what is written. What has this Norman Denzin done?

Jonathan: When we finished that morning I remember only silence. We had been the three presenters, and none of us had dragged on, so there was time for comment and responses, but I have only an imprecise recollection.

What happened?

I think that I remember someone noting the silence, that for them it was because they needed time.

I remember the quiet being welcome and intriguing.

I do not remember being aware of discomfort, but perhaps there was disturbance.

This conference has the capacity to disturb. Jerry Renaut, the protagonist in Robert Cormier's 1974 novel *The Chocolate War*, facing menacing pressure from powerful, oppressive, conservative forces within his high school, has a poster pinned to his locker door: a clichéd scene of coastal, tropical tranquility. Underneath are T.S. Eliot's words: "Do I dare disturb the universe?"

Well, does he, the poster is asking him? Does he dare?

The Congress dares. It dares to disturb.

From bare feet, to children, to white women with dreads, to the articulation of loss, the shedding of tears, to flesh and bodies and blood-red onto-epistemology.

Whether it disturbs, in the way the surface of the pond is disturbed by the skipping stone. Gentle, transitory.

Whether it is the way that my dubious, troubled peace is interrupted by the calls of my neighbor, 2-year-old William, from his raised wooden fort at the end of his garden. Welcome, joyous.

Or the way that the students protested six months ago in the UK against the rise in university fees. Passionate. Futile.

Or Pollock's (1998) "consequential" performative interventions, which embrace and embody struggle against oppressive forces. Hopeful.

Possible.

Not all the sessions here are disturbing, not all the “papers,” not the structure of the conference. The Congress’s capacity and intent to disturb are not obvious.

It is a carnival.

It is Deleuzian *délire*. It is *haecceity*, the assemblage of people, space, time, desire. Flows (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

This is where I become undone. And where I feel alive.

It began that morning in 2005, with Claudio and Tami.

What has this Norman Denzin undone?

Claudio: What has this Norman Denzin done?

A place where

We are dangerous to power, we produce dangerous ethnography (Madison, 2009).

Six years ago but

It started before when I could not find my body in text

A place where

Nobody dares to question *our* rage and love

And loss

A Congress deeply, inspired by Mary Weems (2003), that dares

To expose

Hanging darkened bodies in the middle of the city

Of Baltimore

Rio

Campinas

London

In a festival of fried chicken in greased napkins

In the fattening lips of global corporations

Killing them and us all—such . . . such a waste of flesh in colonizing criminal categories

With all our

Wars, poverty, discrimination

Scholarship and teaching

In beautifully aged campuses

A place where

Aisha Durham can remind us

We forget we teach in chairs and desks

Made in Prisons

On the shoulder of darkened bodies

Hanging in the middle of the city

Of Baltimore

Rio

Campinas

London

I know rage is not enough, otherwise *we* wouldn't be writing

The Congress dares and yet

Doesn't dare to question *our* hope

And the voices we hear. Voices of suffering and despair. Voices of love and desire!

Do you hear voices? Yes! We are that crazy and did more than survive!

Schizowritingphrenic being . . . between Tami's voice: "Remember, writing is the only ritual *we* can enact right now" (Spry, here, now) and

Jonathan's voice: "This is where *we* become undone. And where *we* feel alive.

It began that morning in 2005 . . ." (Wyatt, here, now)

No! Here, we cannot be peed at!

What has this Norman Denzin done?

Raw, dirty, and quick

We bodies of social justice

We embody community! *We* perform generosity!

Schizowritingphrenicly *we* hear Soyini's voice:

I would argue that a *dangerous ethnography* does not begin with interventions on political economies or structures of the state or the nation, on global capitalism or corporate greed, or even on ideologies of neoliberalism or fundamentalism—these are the targets of a dangerous ethnography (with some complication) but they are not the starting point, not the inspiration. My inspiration for a dangerous ethnography begins with performance—that is, the body in the performance. (Madison, 2009, p. 191)

Epilogue

In this messiness of bodies, place, times, and history, they are back in their beginnings where

Different bodies, in gender, nationality, are united in performance.

Jonathan: The next few years, I would see Tami and we would talk briefly, knowing the connection, talking about that session, asking after each other. After perhaps three years, we would begin to become friends and we would write together.

I would see Claudio each year, too. We would stop as we passed each other, sometimes, but even if not, we were warm in our greetings. Each year. We would each—it seems—recognize the contact we had made that first year. (“Remember, the boy was only 5.”) But perhaps we did not know what to do next.

We would each become men who wrote collaboratively and intimately with a (male) friend. Our books, published with our respective writing partners in the same year, would both be about the in-between.

What has kept us in a kind of parallel, guarded, distant intimacy?

Tami and Claudio have their own history, too, I imagine.

What has this Congress opened in the differing, fluid spaces between the three of us?

Tami: Six years ago I was placed here with these two men—both raw and crafted, gentle, beautiful, articulate, cunning—who have become for me touchstones, beacons, in my own schizowritingphrenic being. They, and many others here, live in my own crazy dangerous ethnographic dreams of utopia. I am still sometimes wreckage, free floating, P-Funk, feet-don’t-fail-me-now, Electric Boogaloo wreckage. But they keep moving through the dark, picking through the wreckage, through the blood, or lack of it.

Do you hear voices? I do now. Yes, we are that crazy and did more than survive. This is a love song to you, Norman Denzin. And I know you can hear it because your words are actions of love, you make the word *love* performative, a constant *doing* of hope within dread, locking and unlocking your own hopes and fears, and thusly encouraging “us,” an inclusive deeply heterogeneous “us” to begin or to continue tangled up in blues . . . for nothing better than love.

Claudio: 2005! In the years to come Tami became a rock, my rock, in my academic life! Central to my writing and theorizing . . . always inspirational! At last year’s NCA convention, I received a prize. Tami was in the room. Shortly after I received it, through the corner of my eye, I saw Tami gently leaving the room. My thoughts? Dear Tami attended the meeting only to be there for me! Such a happy moment My dear

Jonathan is to me like a friend that I don't see often but that is there . . . in case something bad happens . . . always aware of each other even if we did not share much . . . Yes, I agree maybe we did not know what to do next, and Tami again brought us together. Between Tami and Jonathan, it is . . . it is a body thing, our blood-red epistemology:

Are we bodies whose story "begins in absence"? (Pollock, 2009, p. 27)

We are bodies that are not thought to inhabit academic spaces.

Our bodies, our stories, simultaneously resist and demand telling.

We bodies of resistance . . . we are resisting autoethnographies

Telling what is not supposed to be told,

We schizowritingphrenic beings *do* more than survive

We dare!

Yes, this is indeed a love song to *you*.

ALL: What has this Norman Denzin done?

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